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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 SHANGHAI 000501

SENSITIVE  
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DEPT FOR EAP/PD, EAP/CM, INR/B  
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SUBJECT: EAST CHINA AUDIENCES FASCINATED AND SURPRISED BY THE U.S.  
ELECTION

REF: Beijing 4193

SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED

¶1. Summary: U.S. election programming over the last 14 months in the Shanghai district proved, in the words of one Chinese student, "a great showcase for democracy." However, media coverage, while extensive, was sometimes limited by Chinese Government restrictions. End Summary.

¶2. While the U.S. Presidential Candidates were busy crisscrossing the nation in search of votes, consulate staff in Shanghai were similarly busy traversing the consular district explaining the U.S. election process to Chinese. The consulate started elections programming early in 2007 and kept up the pace throughout the fall of 2008 employing the full range of outreach tools, including speaker programs, digital videoconferences, consulate speakers, the consulate website, Public Affairs Section (PAS) programs, Information Resource Center (IRC) materials and even our biweekly film series to spread a deeper understanding of how the American people, through a democratic process, chooses the nation's leaders. In addition to frequent university presentations by USG speakers such as the Consul General, Deputy Principal Officer, and the PAO, audiences in East China were able to interact with a variety of private citizens courtesy of the U.S. Speaker and Digital Video Conference Programs, ranging from the political cartoonist Daryl Cagle to former Democratic National Committee Chair Dan Fowler to Grover Norquist of Citizens for Tax Reform. PAS estimates that more than 3,000 Chinese attended one or another of these programs, not/not including the large, live Election Watch party the consulate held on Election Day. Election materials provided by our IRC's distribution at every program and a special "Elections" section of the website that was updated daily ensured that additional materials were also made available to our audiences. Nanjing - site of a Virtual Presence Post - received special attention as an important second-tier city with numerous visits and a special, live Nanjing Election Watch program jointly organized by PAS Shanghai, the Johns Hopkins Center at Nanjing University, and the consulate's new Nanjing Virtual Principal Officer. Consulate officers also made election-focused speaking presentations in Hangzhou and Hefei, the two other provincial capitals in the Shanghai consular district.

13. Comment. Chinese reaction to these programs--and to the election itself--ranged from repetitions of government propaganda to the sophisticated and the surprising and often offered insights into how the Chinese public perceives American society. Several Chinese attendees stated that "Americans will vote for Obama because they prefer young people to old people." One student in Nanjing noted that, "America talks about equality but Hillary's failure shows that women are still not equal in America." Sometimes their questions revealed more about China than the U.S. as another student in Nanjing did when she asked University of Kansas political science professor Burdett Loomis whether Americans "... vote as they want to or as their political parties tell them to?" In a country where home-town ties are surpassed only by familial ties, it was fascinating to one Shanghai-area reporter who was in Chicago covering the elections to discover that Obama's neighbors would carefully consider Obama's policies and not just vote for him because they lived on the same street. Our Election Watch event in Shanghai - attended by over 300 people - proved to have made a particularly strong impression on a number of Chinese observers. A student there commented that, it was "a great showcase for democracy." Seconds after CNN International called the election for Sen. Obama, one veteran America watcher at a Chinese university commented to the PAO that "his victory proves the greatness of your country and its ability to change itself and move forward even in the face of great challenges," while another said that the result was "a milestone for race relations." One excited naturalized AmCit commented proudly upon arrival at the event that he had "exercised [his] inalienable right to vote!"

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14. [SBU] Though there was consistent, factual coverage of the U.S. elections in the Chinese media, the central government still exercised limits on elections reporting in East China. For instance, only a select group of sanctioned, national-level media such as Xinhua and China Central TV were permitted to leave China to report from the U.S. on the elections. Several savvy Shanghai media organizations found ways around these prohibitions, however, such as one major Shanghai-based media group that set up interviews unrelated to the elections with city officials in Chicago in late October to obtain official permission to travel, and then simply "added on" election coverage to their trip once on U.S. soil. Government reaction to the consulate's large Election Day event at the Hilton likewise showed the government's desire to limit coverage on this topic. While a half dozen Chinese media organizations came to cover the event, several were later told by municipal propaganda officials that this was a "foreign affairs" issue and that they had not obtained the proper permission to cover it. Shanghai TV was able to broadcast some of its coverage from the U.S. but had to cut back substantially from its original coverage plans after word came down from Beijing that media should not "sensationalize" the U.S. Presidential election.

15. Comment. Audiences at our election programs were overwhelmingly enthusiastic and interested in the U.S. presidential election. Issues related to race, gender and age made up a significant percentage of attendees' comments and questions, with many noting with surprise and approval that an African-American could be elected as the next U.S. president. Informal polling at a running series of PAS Shanghai programs - our "candy caucus" using blue "DEM" M&M candies and red "GOP" candies was a consistent crowd favorite and sure-fire way to encourage everyone to vote - also indicated that our Chinese audiences favored Obama to McCain, increasing from a slight lead at the time of the party conventions to typically by a ratio of five to one or more as Election Day neared. While some cited Obama's policies, many seemed drawn to what they cited as his youth, eloquence and intelligence. Interestingly, one young,

rising America expert at Fudan University noted approvingly that "Obama seemed like the older man" after watching him fend off Sen. McCain's attacks during one of the PAS-organized programs to watch the debates live at the consulate. Contrary to expectations, he observed that McCain's aggressiveness was making him appear to Chinese audiences as the rasher, "younger" candidate. In the end, it was the process itself that made perhaps the strongest impression. As one teacher noted somewhat wistfully at the conclusion of U.S. Speaker program, it is "unfortunate that we cannot elect a [Communist] Party secretary-general in China."

CAMP